

Fourth Sustainable Operations Summit Goes “Virtual”

Forest Service uses technology to reduce environmental footprint

WASHINGTON, January 21, 2009 – The 4th Forest Service Sustainable Operations Summit was held “virtually,” utilizing technology to save on greenhouse gas emissions. The virtual conference sparked excitement amongst employees by providing information about climate change, sharing success stories and ideas, and developing ways to reduce the agency’s environmental footprint.

The use of technology contributed tremendously to the estimated greenhouse gas emission savings from virtual participation. We saved approximately 287 tons of CO_{2e} from being emitted by hosting the summit virtually, based on this year’s participation numbers. These figures are conservative estimates, because they only take into account emissions directly related to travel, without considering emissions associated with hotel stays, restaurant meals, local transportation, etc.

“Excellent use of technology to reduce green house gases, save energy, and save money while demonstrating and communicating what is happening regionally, nationally, and internationally within the Forest Service in the sustainability arena,” stated one participant.

Technology not only helped reduce our environmental footprint, but it also offered virtual participation to employees across the nation. The summit had 76 participants on-site at Forest Products Laboratory (FPL) and exemplified sustainability by utilizing video teleconferencing and webinars (an internet meeting for sharing visuals and telephone lines for audio) that allowed 380 employees to participate virtually at 25 conference sites, minimizing our environmental footprint.

“The technological piece this year was phenomenal—what an amazing learning experience for the whole agency! I think the exchange of information from this way of hosting conferences will stimulate discussion long into the future,” one participant said.

According to Sue LeVan, Program Manager in the State & Private Forestry Technology Marketing Unit, the highlight of the summit was the Deer River Ranger District’s Extreme Environmental Footprint Makeover Premiere. The engaging and fun video captures all the combined efforts the Deer River Ranger District carried out to reduce its environmental footprint in all Footprint Focus Areas.

The Sustainable Operations Summit set a high standard for greening the agency by encouraging innovative thinking and practices, and increasing our capacity to use virtual meetings in place of travel. Sheela Doshi, Natural Resource Specialist in the Eastern Region, believes the success stories and information shared throughout the summit helped spark interest from other agencies who want to promote sustainability.

Strong leadership support, the dedication of planning team members, good technical support, and enthusiasm of video conference site coordinators were integral to the success of this virtual summit.

Best summarized by a virtual participant, “I applaud the planning team for sticking with the virtual technology. It was groundbreaking for the Forest Service to use this technology on such a grand scale. I know that it took lots of time to plan for the use of this technology. Yes, there were some glitches. But overall, it was amazing to see the technology action.”

Participants provided strong feedback about the summit through online evaluations. Ninety-four percent of participants that responded rated the overall content “good” or “very good.” In person participants rated the overall content slightly higher (with 72% rating it “very good”). As one virtual participant said, “The information, content, and questions were...fantastic.”



Participants from Northeastern Area and Northern Research Station in Durham, New Hampshire watch a webinar.



Steve Schmieding of FPL was the 'technology guru' and kept things running smoothly.



Jane Cliff (R9), Sheela Doshi (R9) and Sherri Wormstead (Northeastern Area State & Private Forestry), served as core planning team members.



Sue LeVan (left) and Sue Paulson (right) of FPL led the planning effort.



Paul DeLong, Wisconsin State Forester, delivers his keynote speech live at FPL and via video conference.

For more information, contact Jacqueline A. Emanuel, USDA Forest Service, Sustainable Business Operations, (202) 205-0860 or jemanuel@fs.fed.us.